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SEGULA

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EMMA LAZARUS AND AMERICAN JEWISH IDENTITY

SPECIAL ISSUE
JEWISH IMMIGRATION TO AMERICA

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JEWISH AMERICAN DEMOGRAPHICS
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Making Jews Count

Where is the critical mass of the Jewish people, and why does it matter? How do different perceptions of Jewishness affect the count? Disputing Jewish population estimates for Israel and the United States // Michelle Shain

Which country has more Jews – Israel or the United States? Will Israel be home to the numerical majority of world Jewry any time soon?

These are freighted questions, carrying the weight of centuries of ideological dispute and generations of hand-wringing and finger-wagging. For some, the idea of Israel surpassing the United States as the world's largest Jewish population center is the ultimate vindication of the Zionist project. For others, the debate over the size of the U.S. Jewish population has become the battleground that will prove the feasibility of Jewish life in the Diaspora and, moreover, show that American Judaism's mores and values are worthy of respect.

Of course, size is only one measure of any Jewish community's centrality to the Jewish future. Ahad Ha-am famously championed Zion as a Jewish cultural center that would rejuvenate and preserve the Diaspora rather than house the majority of Jews. And today, Israel is indisputably a center of Jewish culture and religious innovation – for example, according to the National Library, more than seven thousand original Hebrew books were published in the country in 2018.

Yet population numbers matter. There are practical Jewish legal implications of a majority of Jews residing in the land of Israel. Furthermore, how Jews are counted illuminates the unities and fractures in the Jewish people's self-understanding. Perhaps most of all, population matters because it points to the future of world Jewry.

Counting or Labeling?

An accurate count of the number of Jews living in Israel is readily available from the Israeli government. Israel's Population Registry records the nationality of all Israeli residents, with options including Jewish, Arab, and many other small ethno-religious minorities. To be registered as a Jew, one must be born to a Jewish mother or convert to Judaism – a definition that tracks closely with halakha, Jewish law. In February 2021, the Jewish population of Israel was 6,870,900, including the Jewish residents of Judea and Samaria.

// Unlike their Israeli brethren, American Jews can "opt out" of the national Jewish population if they stop identifying as Jews

The U.S. government doesn't catalog its citizens' religious preferences, nor does it ask about religion in its decennial census. Therefore, social scientists must rely on other methods of tallying the American Jewish population, including determining who's considered part of this group for research purposes.

In general, social scientists classify someone as Jewish if he identifies as such and has some normative claim to bolster that identification. In practice, this means one must either declare Judaism his religion or claim no religion but consider himself Jewish (or partially Jewish) "aside from religion." He must also have at least one Jewish parent or have formally converted to Judaism. Those who identify as members of another religion are excluded, even if they also identify as Jewish.

Two rigorous, scientific methods are used to estimate the number of Americans who meet these criteria. One method is typified by the Pew Research Center's 2013 Survey of U.S. Jews, and the other has been spearheaded by Brandeis University's American Jewish Population Project (AJPP).

Researchers using the first method determine the number of Jews in a very large, representative sample of Americans, then extrapolate regarding the number nationwide. In 2013, the Pew Research Center interviewed more than 70,000 random Americans about their religion and Jewish connections. That study concluded that there were 6.7 million Jews in the United States: roughly 5.3 million adults and 1.3 million children.

The second method combines data from dozens of nationally representative surveys, such as ABC News/*Washington Post* polls asking, "What, if anything, is your religion?" Complex statistical models are then employed to estimate the number of American adults whose religion is Judaism. Other sources, such as Jewish community surveys, are used to estimate the additional number of Jewish adults claiming to be atheist, agnostic, or "no religion," as well as the number of Jewish children.

The AJPP estimated the American Jewish population in 2012 at 6.8 million: 5.2 million adults and 1.6 million children (Elizabeth Tighe et al., "American Jewish Population Estimates: 2012" [Waltham, Mass.: Steinhardt Social Research Institute, Brandeis University, 2013]). This number is virtually identical to the Pew Research Center's 2013 estimate, increasing confidence in both figures.

The Pew Research Center's updated estimate for 2020 was not released in time to be included int his article, but the AJPP regularly updates its projections. As of 2020, according to the AJPP, American Jewry had grown to 7.6 million: 6 million adults and 1.6 million children (Steinhardt Social Research Institute, "American Jewish Population Estimates 2020: Summary and Highlights" [Brandeis University, 2021]).

Jews on the Margins

Certain subgroups' inclusion in the Jewish population is debatable. For example, what about those who identify as atheist, agnostic, or "no religion" and as only partially Jewish aside from religion? Some have argued that such people, who display relatively few distinctive Jewish attitudes or behaviors, aren't part of American Jewry. Israeli demographer Sergio DellaPergola has pointed out that had the partially Jewish subgroup not been included in the Pew

Research Center's 2013 estimate of Jewish adults, the total would have dropped from 5.3 million to 4.7 million. Had the same proportion of partial Jews been excluded from the AJPP's 2020 estimate of American Jews, that figure would have shrunk from 7.6 million to 6.7 million.

The "partially Jewish" category largely overlaps with another subgroup: children of intermarriage. About 12 percent of the U.S. Jewish population is composed of those with Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers, who would not be classified as Jews by Israel's Population Registry. Excluding these people would certainly decrease the American Jewish population.

At the same time, American Jews can "opt out" of this population if they stop identifying as Jewish, an option that doesn't exist for Israeli Jews vis-à-vis the Population Registry. In 2013, the Pew Research Center found that 1.3 million American adults had Jewish mothers but didn't identify as Jews – more than the number of American Jews born to Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers.

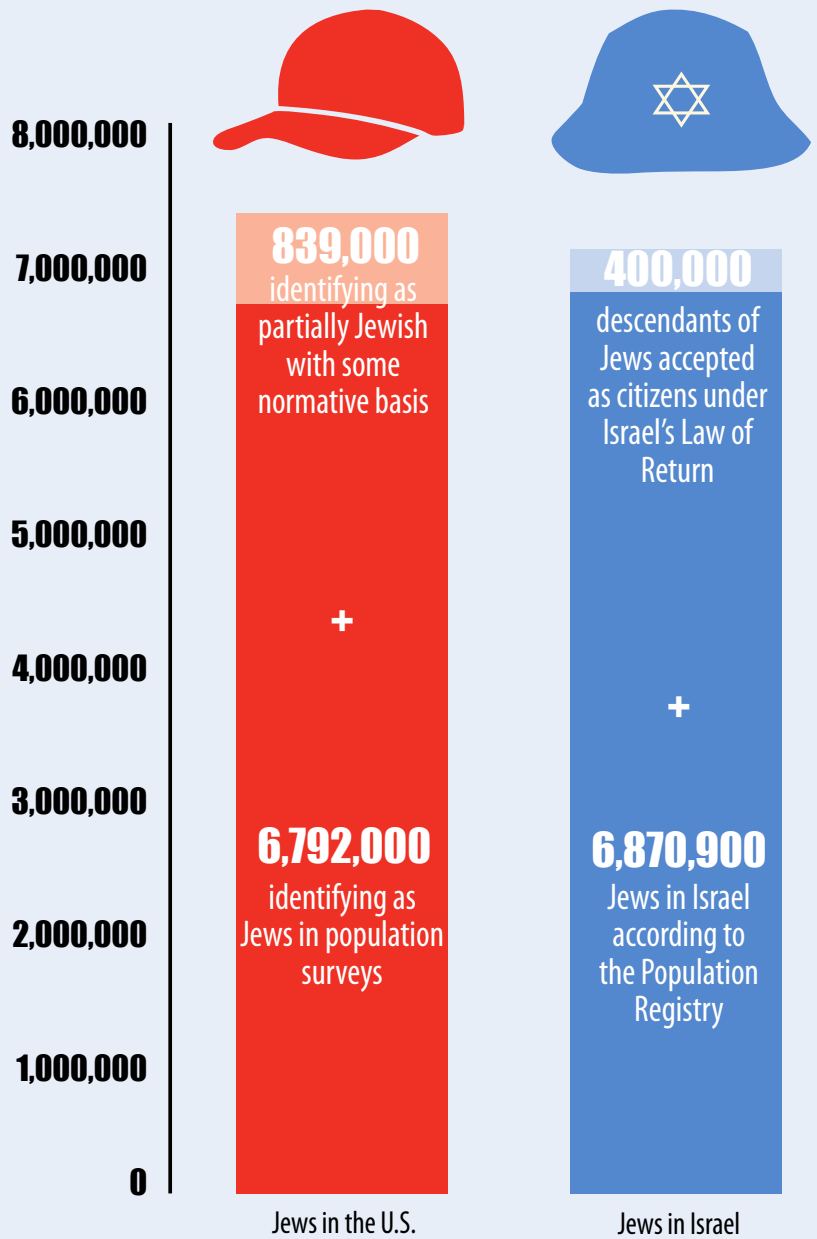
Finally, about 400,000 Israelis aren't Jews according to Jewish law or Israel's Population Registry but immigrated to Israel under the Law of Return, which welcomes children and grandchildren of Jews as well as their spouses. These individuals, mostly from the former Soviet Union, are largely integrated into Israel's Jewish cultural mainstream. They speak Hebrew and serve in the Israel Defense Forces. Are they less a part of the Jewish people than the "partial Jews" living in the United States? Adding their number to the 6.9 million Jews in Israel would boost the country's Jewish population to 7.3 million.

Cooking the Numbers

The question of whether there are more Jews living in Israel or the United States hinges on these subgroups. The AJPP's current estimate of 7.6 million American Jews, which includes partial Jews, exceeds the 6.9 million Jews registered in Israel's Population Registry. Even the additional

Comparative Numbers

The Jewish population in Israel compared with the number identifying as Jews in the U.S.



Currently, even taking into account those eligible for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return who are not Jews by Orthodox standards, Israel's Jewish population is slightly less than the number identifying as Jewish or partially Jewish in America

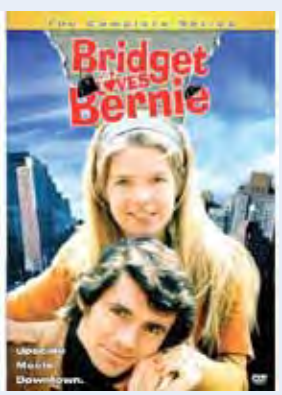
Mixed Message

The 1970s sitcom *Bridget Loves Bernie* portrayed an interfaith couple – an Irish Catholic schoolteacher (played by Meredith Baxter) and a Jewish taxi driver and aspiring playwright (David Birney). (Baxter and Birney actually married at the series' end, though neither was Jewish.) The tensions involved in uniting a working-class Jewish family and old-money Catholics – ranging from what kind of religious wedding ceremony to hold to the relationships between in-laws – clearly struck a chord, as the show received top ratings.

Yet the Jewish community objected. Reform and Conservative rabbis denounced the series as a mockery of Judaism, and the Jewish Defense League issued threats. As a result, the program lasted just one season.

Since then, assimilation and intermarriage have skyrocketed, and interfaith couples now figure in many movies and TV shows.

Sara Jo Ben Zvi



Cover of the *Bridget Loves Bernie* DVD

// Are Israel's Hebrew-speaking, army-serving descendants of Jews less a part of the Jewish people than the partially Jewish subgroup living in the United States?

400,000 non-Jews who immigrated to Israel under the Law of Return wouldn't place the Israeli Jewish population above 7.6 million. Nevertheless, without the partially Jewish, American Jewry would total 6.7 million, slightly less than the number of Israeli Jews according to the Population Registry.

Fundamentally, the Israeli and U.S. Jewish populations are defined differently because the very nature of Jewish identity differs in each country. On the whole, Israeli Jews emphasize Jewish particularism, collective responsibility, and one authoritative, authentic source of Jewish tradition (which they may or may not follow). American Jews, in contrast, tend to focus on universal ethical principles, religious pluralism, and personal autonomy.

Given these differences, it makes sense that Israel's Jewish population is defined according to criteria that are largely fixed and grounded in halakha, while the boundaries of American Jewry are more fluid, taking into account personal choice and including those with Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. These different definitions are a natural outgrowth of the varying interpretations of being Jewish.

Looking Forward

What will happen in the coming decades?

First, it's important to remember that there are still some 2.3 million Jews elsewhere in the world, mostly in France, Canada, the United Kingdom, Argentina, Russia, Germany, and Australia (Sergio DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population, 2018"). It will take time before either Israel or the United States can claim to have the majority of Jews – for now, each can claim only the most Jews.

Second, Israel's Jewish population will

What Does the Future Hold?

Scenarios of Jewish population growth in the United States

almost certainly increase dramatically. More than 40 percent of Israeli Jews are under age twenty-five, and Israeli Jewish women average just over 3.0 children each. In contrast, only about a quarter of American Jews are under age twenty-five, and the American Jewish fertility rate is closer to 1.9 children per woman. Based solely on age structure and fertility rates, then, the Israeli Jewish population is poised to grow much faster than the American.

Yet the trajectory of American Jewry also depends largely on trends in intermarriage and the Jewish identity of the offspring born to these couples. Any two American Jews can create two intermarriages but only one "inmarriage." In theory, therefore, intermarriage could increase the U.S. Jewish population as currently defined *if* more than half of the children of such unions identify as Jews into adulthood (see table). Whether such a scenario will actually materialize remains to be seen.

Bottom Line

Thanks to Israel's Population Registry and Central Bureau of Statistics, the Pew Research Center, and Brandeis University, precise, reliable data enable us to determine how many Jews live in Israel and the United States according to many criteria. Yet researchers, policymakers, and the Jewish community disagree about how to interpret these figures – who should count, under what circumstances, and for what purpose. These are questions of values, not of facts. When arguing whether Israel or the United States has the largest Jewish population, the challenge is to acknowledge both the data and the different values underlying each claim. □

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Intermarriage among American Jews could actually increase the American Jewish population – as long as more than half the children of these marriages identify as Jews